

The characteristic features of the ancient Japanese village

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The geo-political structure of local administration in ancient Japan was hierarchically comprised of *ri* 里 (groupings of 50 households, later called *go* 郷), *gun* 郡 (comprised of between two and twenty *ri*), several of which comprised a *kuni* 国 (province). The research to date on the ancient village has argued that while village settlements (*mura* 村) were provided for in the legal codes of Tang China, no provision was made for similar settlements (*mura* 村) in the Japanese version of those codes; therefore, *mura* was not the basic organizational unit of the ancient state. However, since there is room to consider that at the time when the fifty household system (*gojukko-sei* 五十戸制), the precursor of *ri*, was introduced as the local administrative mechanism in Japan during latter part of the 7th century, the institution of *mura* either did not exist in China or at least was not fully established, the author of this article argues that the fact that no provisions for *mura* were made in the Japanese *ryo* 令 codes by no means leads to the conclusion that *mura* was not the basic unit on which the ancient Japanese state was built. Since there were no distinguishing structural features of villages, like village gates or walls, the author concludes that as of the beginning of the 8th century, there was no need to institutionally establish a village system.

The key to clarifying the character of the ancient Japanese village is to pay careful attention to the historiographical sources indigenous to Japan. Most *mura* were smaller in size than the thousand residents usually making up each *ri*, and it was the former that became the main points of contact between local society and central government administration. Although the text of the Japanese *ryo* codes specified that information be transmitted to leaders of *ri*, in fact, from the mid-8th until the mid-9th century, the *mura* was the object of such central-local government affairs as emergency contact and the collection of

taxes. As indicated by in the border markers (*bojisatsu* 榜示札) of Kaga Gun excavated at the Kamo Site in Ishikawa Prefecture, whenever the central government sent information there, the recipients were the local *mura*, although “村” was not an administrative term. In other words, *gun* which were in direct contact with local *mura* had officially recognized these settlements, despite the fact that they were not provided for in the official *ryo* codes. Consequently, the author concludes that during the period in question, directives originating at the central government and transmitted to its subjects in the provinces could not have reached them by any other means than through their *mura*. In this sense, the *mura* was indeed the basic organizational unit upon which the ancient Japanese state was built.